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THE COLLAPSE OF THE MOVEMENT AGAINST THE LORDS.

BY EDWARD PORRITT

THE movement against the House of Lords arising out of its mutilation of the Education bill of 1906 has collapsed. Mr. A. P. DuCross, the successful Conservative candidate at the by-election at Hastings on the 3rd of March last, in surveying at the close of the contest the political issues on which it had been fought, asserted that there had scarcely been a mention of the agitation against the House of Lords; and a week later the Lords again threw out the Scotch Small Holdings bill, a Government measure, which has now been twice passed by the House of Commons. The agitation against the Lords begun in 1906 was exceedingly short-lived, and was never even as formidable as the abortive and short-lived movement against the Lords in 1893, due to their rejection of Gladstone's second Home Rule bill. The agitation of fifteen years ago did at least produce some memorable fighting speeches against the Lords from Gladstone and Harcourt.

It is not necessary to be in England to understand why this latest assault on the House of Lords has so completely collapsed. One of the manifest reasons for its failure is the bill over which the House of Commons and the House of Lords came into collision; and a still more obvious reason is the new attitude of the working classes who take an active interest in politics towards official Liberalism and its relations with the House of Lords, particularly as concerns the part of official Liberalism in the creation of peers.

The Marquis of Lansdowne is the floor-manager of the Opposition in the House of Lords. The position of floor-manager must be held by a peer. Only a peer can have access to the floor;

and access to the floor is necessary for giving orders and for the marshalling of the Opposition forces. But the real leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords as well as in the House of Commons is Mr. Balfour, who is a much more practical politician than the titular leader of the Conservative Opposition in the House of Lords. It is now accepted that it was on Mr. Balfour's instructions that the majority in the House of Lords permitted the Trades Disputes bill of 1906—a bill that Lord Halsbury, the ex-Lord Chancellor, denounced as gross, outrageous and tyrannical—to go forward for the royal assent, and in the same session so pulverized the Education bill that the Campbell-Bannerman Government had no option but to abandon it.

Mr. Balfour, as a practical politician, knew that the rejection of the Trades Disputes bill would immediately have provoked greater popular hostility to the House of Lords than any action which the Lords have taken since they threatened the Reform Act of 1884. But even the Lords themselves—or at any rate the small minority of them who pretend to any continuous and intelligent interest in public affairs—must have known that there would be no Hyde Park or Trafalgar Square demonstrations if the Education bill were destroyed. There could be no real enthusiasm for it, because as it went from the Commons to the Lords the measure embodied too many concessions to the Established Church and to the Church of Rome in England.

There were tens of thousands of Free Churchmen, all supporters of the Liberal Government, who were displeased at these concessions, and who pretended no disappointment or regret when the Government abandoned Mr. Birrell's measure. It was not the bill they had expected from a Liberal Government new from a General Election which had given the Liberals the greatest majority in Parliamentary history; and they saw in it no complete removal of religious disabilities and civic inequalities which date back to the thirties of the nineteenth century, when the House of Commons began to vote money for elementary education.

Neither Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman nor Mr. Birrell, who was then Minister of Education, can have expected that Free Churchmen would work themselves into a fury against the House of Lords for its action on the Education bill of 1906. Free Churchmen were not sufficiently enamored of the bill to disturb

themselves over its fate; and if middle-class Free Churchmen were not aroused there was even less reason to expect that working-class England would be provoked to demonstrate against the House of Lords as it did in 1832 and 1884.

The laboring population of England, urban and rural, which must be really aroused if there is to be an effective demonstration against the House of Lords, cares little for education in the abstract. At least three generations of the artisan and laboring classes have gone through the public elementary schools over which all the political and sectarian turmoil of the last thirty-eight years has arisen. But few of these people concern themselves about education after they leave school at the age of twelve or thirteen years.

Elementary education in England has always been administered from above. In rural England it has been dominated by the Church of England clergy. In urban England, even in those cities where there were school boards, the members of the boards were of the middle class—men and women who did not send their own children to the schools under the boards. For over seventy years education questions—especially the questions arising in connection with the elementary schools and the part of the churches in their control and management—have been almost exclusively of what may be described as middle-class politics.

Education to-day—especially in the phases which come before Parliament—is as essentially middle-class politics as was the reform of the civil service half a century ago. The working-classes in the years when Graham, Gladstone and Stafford Northcote were reforming the civil service, and throwing it open to general competition, had little interest in the question, because few of them had any expectation of entering the civil service. It is much the same to-day with the working-classes as regards the long and vexed controversy over the primary schools between the Established Church and the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, and the Free Churches on the other. Even the working men and women who attend the churches take no keen interest in the controversy.

Conflicts between the House of Commons and the House of Lords date only from 1831. The first in which there was any wide-spread popular interest came at that time. There could be none before then, because for a century and a half before

1831 the peers had always had it in their power to elect three-fifths of the members of the House of Commons. It was over the partial loss of this power that the first uprising against the House of Lords occurred; and the only popular uprisings against Bourbon Toryism and the House of Lords since then were in 1866 and 1884-85 when the power of the Lords and of the territorial aristocracy generally over the election of the House of Commons was further curtailed by the second and third Reform Acts. Not much of the power of the peers over the election of the House of Commons was transferred to the working-classes by the first Reform bill. What transference of electoral power there was in 1832 was to the middle-classes; but the conditions of the working-classes for twenty or thirty years before 1832—economic and social—had been desperate. These conditions were worse than at any previous time in English history; and in 1831-32 it took comparatively little agitation to arouse the working-classes to a wild fury against the Bourbon tactics of the House of Lords, and to bring the country within measurable distance of revolution.

The working-classes were aroused again in 1866 and in 1884-85, because if the Reform Acts of these years had been side-tracked by the Lords privileges which were valued would have been withheld—in the first case from the working-classes in the large towns, and in the second instance from the laboring population of rural England. Every laboring-man in England, even if he does not use his Parliamentary vote, knows that the possession of a vote adds at least to his social consequence.

The non-political among the working-men—those who rarely give a thought to politics except for a few days before a contested Parliamentary election—have not been in the least aroused by the action of the House of Lords over Mr. Birrell's Education bill. These men have not even cared to trouble themselves to understand the beneficent changes it would have made. They were not concerned about the fact that it would have brought all elementary schools under the control of popularly elected local authorities, and swept away the religious disabilities which for seventy years have hedged about the school-teaching profession. There have consequently been no protests or demonstrations from them, such as there were from people of their class on the two great occasions in the nineteenth century when the Commons

were at issue with the Lords over questions which really touched all ranks of the people.

A distinction has been drawn between political and non-political working-men. Such a distinction is necessary if the present democratic movement in England is to be understood, and if one important reason for the failure of the official Liberal movement against the House of Lords is to be appreciated. There never was a time when the political working-classes in England were more active or more in earnest than they are to-day. But this activity differs in some essential particulars from the activity of the working-classes in politics at any time since the Chartist agitation in the middle years of last century. All the democratic movement in England to-day—all the movement that since January, 1906, has resulted in the election of thirty-one independent labor members to the House of Commons—has working-class leaders and working-class political aims.

At no time in English history have the working-classes been more active in Parliamentary politics than during the last three or four years. They have gained three additional seats since the General Election of 1906; and no working-class movement, since the Chartist agitation collapsed, has caused more uneasiness to the two old-line political parties—the Liberals and Conservatives—than the movement in and out of Parliament now led by Mr. Arthur Henderson, M.P., who in February last succeeded Mr. Kier Hardie, M.P., as chairman of the new Labor group in Parliament. In the House of Commons and in the constituencies these labor politicians hold themselves quite apart from the official Liberals; and one of the most obvious reasons for the collapse of the Liberal movement against the House of Lords was the aloofness from the movement of these labor members and the electors in the constituencies who support them.

These labor politicians, both in and out of Parliament, are hostile to the House of Lords; but ever since the Campbell-Bannerman Government came into power they have distrusted the sincerity of the official Liberal movement against the Lords; and this distrust is manifestly shared by thousands of the rank and file of the Liberal party in the constituencies who hold aloof from the new labor movement in politics.

Every new Liberal Government in England suffers to some extent from the distribution of honors, offices and patronage.

Of patronage, in the ordinary sense of the term, a Government in England has comparatively little to distribute; for there are few civil-service appointments that are available as rewards for partisan service. But it is within the power of the Government to recommend men to the Sovereign for knighthoods, baronetcies, and peerages; to appoint prominent local men as unpaid magistrates; and there are hundreds of livings in the Church, as well as appointments to bishoprics and deaneries and canonries, which are in the bestowal of the Crown—in other words, in the gift of the Government.

The bestowal of this ecclesiastical patronage has brought its usual share of dissatisfaction with the Government. There has been more than usual discontent over the appointments of magistrates; but the greatest loss of prestige to the Government has been caused by the bestowal of honors—baronetcies and peerages—especially peerages. The shower of peerages, quite as much as the character of the bill over which the Lords and Commons came into collision, accounts for the weakness of the official Liberal movement against the Lords. It partly explains why there was no popular enthusiasm behind the movement—not a single Hyde Park demonstration, nor a great mass-meeting anywhere in provincial England, which is usually quicker to move in agitations of the kind than London; and why the labor politicians in and out of Parliament, and old-line Radicals who at the General Election voted for official Liberal candidates, permitted the Liberal onslaught on the House of Lords over the Education bill to fizzle.

From the time it was seen that the Campbell-Bannerman Government had such an enormous majority in the House of Commons, it was realized that there must be conflicts with the House of Lords if the Government were to implement its election pledges, and attempt to catch up with the arrears of Liberal legislation that had accumulated since the Home Rule split in the Liberal party in 1886. It was known that the House of Lords had assumed new importance since its rejection of Gladstone's Home Rule bill of 1893, and that with a Liberal Government in power, the Conservative majority there would assert itself with more daring than at any time since the Lords and Commons began to come into conflict in 1831.

At no time have the rank and file of the Radicals any sympathy

with the creation of peers. The Parliamentary handbooks show that in the long run almost every creation of peers, whether by Liberal or Conservative Governments, adds to the permanent strength of the Conservative party in the House of Lords. Between 1831 and the end of the nineteenth century, two hundred and fifteen peerages were created by Whig and Liberal Governments; yet, in spite of these additions to the House of Lords of men who were of the Whig or Liberal party at the time of their elevation, there were only forty-one Liberal peers when the Campbell-Bannerman Government came into office in November, 1905.

Liberals and Radicals who are not of the official Liberal group in the House of Commons, or closely associated with it in the constituencies, object, moreover, to creations of peers by a Liberal Government, because each creation means an addition to a privileged order; and because, even granting that this order should be maintained, they hold that a man should have rendered great and signal service to the State before he is made a peer and the right to a seat in the House of Lords becomes hereditary in his family. They object to creations of peers also because of the effect that frequent additions to the peerage have on the land system.

Every man of wealth on whom a baronetcy or peerage is bestowed—and only rich men can reach out for these honors—is anxious to secure a territorial background. Men of newly acquired wealth who are travelling the well-trodden routes to a baronetcy or a peerage are usually some years in reaching their goal. A baronetcy is often a half-way house to a peerage. It has almost invariably been so with men who have made enormous fortunes in trade—bankers, financiers, brewers, coal-owners, chemical manufacturers, ship-owners, and ironmasters—who have bought their way into the ranks of the aristocracy.

The most common method of securing a peerage adopted by these men is to obtain a seat in the House of Commons; vote steadily with their party; and to finance a party newspaper or contribute largely to the central campaign funds of their party. These methods patiently followed seldom fail to bring their reward. A wealthy man who starts on one of these routes to the peerage is pretty sure of his prize if he can keep up the pace; and from the time he starts out on his journey he is on the lookout for landed property that shall serve as the territorial back-

ground of the titled family that he is anxious to establish. Estimated possessions are necessary if there is to be any permanency for his family. When he goes into the estate-market he is not concerned about the economic value of the land he acquires. It is its social value that appeals to him. He needs it for a background; and the more of it he can acquire and entail, the better will be the position of his family, after the coveted peerage has been obtained, and his family is of the aristocracy hall-marked by the Sovereign.

Every estate acquired with this end in view adds to the already enormous area of England held in few hands, and increases the difficulties which bar ordinary Englishmen from access to the land—from holding land except as tenants whose rents are often based on an inflated purchase price. A man may represent a Liberal constituency in the House of Commons while he is working his way to the peerage. But his Liberalism is seldom robust; and while a peer who owes his elevation to a Liberal Government may act with the Liberals, the chances are nine to one that, when he is succeeded in the peerage by his son, the Conservatives in the House of Lords will gain a recruit, as will also Conservatism in the county in which the territorial background of the new aristocratic family is situated. New strength is in this way constantly accruing to the political party that looks at all land legislation—English, Scotch or Irish—exclusively from the point of view of the great landowners, and regards an inroad on the existing feudal system, no matter how necessary it may be to the welfare of the nation, as an assault on its order.

This is the point of view from which unofficial Liberalism regards the creation of peerages—whether by Conservative or Liberal Governments. They are disliked because they strengthen a privileged order and continue an archaic feudalism; because they ultimately mean an increase in the strength of the Conservatives; and because of their effect on the land economy of England.

Finally, there is the objection that peerages for men who have merely travelled the campaign-fund and newspaper routes are nothing but bribes—mere survivals from the days when the right to elect men to the House of Commons was sold as openly as landed or any other property; survivals that should never have been permitted to outlast the drastic Corrupt Practices Act of

1883 by which bribery of voters at Parliamentary elections was at last wiped out.

At ordinary times, this is the way in which the rank and file of the Liberal party regards these new peerages. The return of the Campbell-Bannerman Government in 1906 was, however, not an ordinary occasion. It was the greatest democratic uprising in the history of the House of Commons; and the rank and file of the Liberal party would have liked the new Government to assume an attitude towards the House of Lords in keeping with the popular movement which had given it such a tremendous majority in the House of Commons. Aware of the inevitable conflicts between the House of Commons and the House of Lords, they would have welcomed an announcement from the Government that it would recommend the creation of no new peerages.

No such announcement was forthcoming. The Government began paying its campaign debts in the old way before it had been a month in office—even before the General Election. It has continued the payments ever since. From December, 1905, when the Liberal Government came into office, until the end of November, 1907, there were created twenty peers, nineteen privy councillors, thirty-three baronets and ninety-five knights; and of the men so honored, thirty-seven were supporters of the Government in the House of Commons. In the period between November, 1903, and November, 1905, during which Mr. Balfour was in power, thirteen peers were created. The peers created by the Liberal Government outnumbered those created by the Conservatives by seven, and were equal to one-third of the number created by Charles II between the Restoration and his death in 1685. Most of the new Liberal peers had no claim to distinction beyond the fact that they had travelled either the campaign-fund or the newspaper route; while several of them were so unknown that people not within the circle of official Liberalism searched in vain for a reason to justify their being made hereditary legislators.

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